DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 347 564 CS 213 468

AUTHOR White, Fred D.
TITLE "Thoughts across My Corpus Callosum": What Lewis Thomas's Essays Can Teach Students about Writing Well.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Creative Expression; *Creative Thinking; *Essays; Higher Education; *Holistic Approach; Student Needs; Undergraduate Students; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Thomas (Lewis)

ABSTRACT

As Lewis Thomas has maintained, much of today's public anxiety about science is the apprehension that the whole is being overlooked by an endless, obsessive preoccupation with the parts, and this is a suitable analogy for composition teaching. Students and teachers alike tend to fret endlessly over minute details of writing, like grammar, spelling, topic sentences, and conclusions. Writing essays recruits both hemispheres of the brain equally, and engagement in writing must come from heartfelt interaction with the world. Not even punctuation should be rulebound. Writing teachers can utilize the writings of Thomas to set off combinatorial fireworks in their students. Thomas reveals that the exploring self cannot be segregated from its social milieu, making some degree of personal writing not only inevitable but valuable. Thomas's essays demonstrate how the writer can become engaged holistically with a subject before indulging in objectified scientific observation. Students should be introduced to Thomas by reading select essays and then voicing their initial critical responses. Sample student responses show that Thomas's sudden and often inexplicable transitions bring about consternation and surprise. However, a difficult transition can be turned around as a question to the wondering student about the purpose of such a mysterious transition. Exercises like this will allow students to become receptive to truly creative thinkers and to recognize that hard forms are not always the best way to write an essay. (HB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Fred D. White
Dept. of English
Santa Clara University
Santa Clara, CA 95053

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Fred D. White
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED347564

"Thoughts Across My Corpus Collosum": What Lewis Thomas's Essays Can Teach Students About Writing Well*

In "The Tucson Zoo" Lewis Thomas describes a "bi-hemispheric" moment of awareness when he walks along a path bisecting two artificial ponds (one for otters, one for beavers), walled in by clear glass, and experiences holistically, with childlike delight, the frolicking creatures. "I was transfixed. . . . I could hear shouts across my corpus collosum, from one hemisphere to the other. I remember thinking . . . that I wanted no part of the science of beavers and otters; I wanted never to know how they performed their marvels" (*Medusa and the Snail* 8). The experience was only fleeting, and the scientific-reductionist awareness quickly took over. But a crucial shift in focus had occurred: Thomas had begun thinking about the phenomenon of his own thinking. He realized, for example, that he was "coded for" beavers and otters, that they triggered a richly complex affective/aesthetic ("right-brained") response that seemed more like magic than reality. Such engagement with the natural world, with people, with the things that we are "coded for," is, one could argue, a quintessentially human experience: it leads to altruism, which, according to Thomas, may prove to be our most important

CS213468

* This paper was originally presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Cincinnati, March 1992.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

activity for survival (more important than aggression). And the best way for such interactiveness to begin is through spontaneous delight, with the left brain's logic center momentarily on hold.

Thomas prefaces his experience in the Tucson Zoo by expressing concern over modern science's need to particularize whatever it investigates: "Sometimes it seems that we take a loss, working this way. Much of today's public anxiety about science is the apprehension that we may forever be overlooking the whole by an endless, obsessive preoccupation with the parts" (7).

I see this as a suitable analogy for composition teaching. Students and teachers alike sometimes fret endlessly over the constituent parts of an essay: introduction, body, conclusion; thesis statement, topic sentences with their entourages of primary- secondary- and tertiary-support statements; not to mention grammar, style, punctuation. Perhaps Maxine Hairston is right to accuse us of "physics envy"--an expression she borrowed, interestingly enough, from Lewis Thomas ("Humanities and Science," in *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony*). Writing essays is *not* analogous to doing science--that is, to doing primary, laboratory-based scientific research. What we writing teachers need, I think, is a better sense of when to do what. Even the science curriculum in many schools has this problem of putting the analytic cart before the affective horse, according to Thomas: "I suggest that the introductory courses in science, at all levels . . . be radically revised," he asserts. "Leave the fundamentals, the so-called basics, aside for a while, and concentrate the attention of all students on the things that are *not* known" (*Late Night Thoughts* 151).

Now, according to Lewis Thomas, in order to do *biology* on otters and beavers, he would need to disregard his ecstatic moment (although I find this debatable--and I think if we pressed Thomas on the matter, he would probably agree that ecstatic moments can be important motivators for scientists); be that as it may, to write *essays* about otters, the ecstasy seems crucial. An essay, even when critical or analytical, must inform in a manner that *in some degree* delights. It is a mistake, I would argue, to assume that the affective and the analytic are separate domains, involving different kinds of discourse.

Writing essays, like beholding otters and beavers, recruits both hemispheres of the brain equally, although not necessarily simultaneously. And if we wonder why so much student writing, even when coherent and substantive, is bloodless, it is because students have not been able to apprehend their subject holistically. Engagement cannot be taught with rules, or even with heuristics like clustering or freewriting; it has got to come from heartfelt interaction with the world.

Not even punctuation should be rulebound: As Thomas asserts one of his cleverest essays, "Notes on Punctuation," "There are no precise rules about punctuation"; and he proceeds not only to discuss common-sensical underpinnings of commas, semicolons, and the like, but illustrates his points with the very sentences he uses to make his assertions:

> If you try to come back after doing a paragraph and stick [commas] in the various spots that tempt you you will discover that they tend to swarm like minnows into all sorts of crevices whose existence you hadn't realized and before you know it the whole long sentence becomes immobilized and lashed up squirming in commas. Better to use

them sparingly, and with affection, precisely when the need for each one arises, nicely, by itself.

(*Medusa and the Snail* 126)

II

I would like to suggest ways in which writing teachers can use a Lewis Thomas essay to set off combinatorial fireworks in students. I must first tell you that Thomas can be tricky to teach, and that careful planning is necessary--I speak from experience when I say this. I used to think that students would feel a rush of rhetorical freedom when they encountered a Lewis Thomas essay--Look! you can write about scientific ideas and say "I"; you can talk about DNA and microorganisms living symbiotically inside the digestive tracts of termites, and do so with a folksy informality that sounds much more like Mark Twain than like any self-respecting biologist. "Can you see all the possibilities available to you? I had asked my students. No, they could not. As far as they were concerned, Thomas had interesting things to say but the writing "didn't flow" (too many unfamiliar ideas, helter-skelter organization, awkward transitions, no clear thesis. Talk about generating cognitive dissonance! But surely, a National Book Award winning essayist like Lewis Thomas knew a thing or two about transitions and thesis statements! What were my students overlooking? Just as importantly, what was I overlooking?

Montaigne writes, "Could my mind take footing, I would not make essays." Essay writing, as the word itself denotes, means trying out an idea, seeing where it leads. It presupposes a social context for conversation: the exploring self eager to try out its insights on curious readers who are eager to engage in conversation with the essayist. Every essay, in the Montaignean

sense, invites--indeed, presupposes--counter-essays. Such is the spirit in which Lewis Thomas writes his essays. They are the conversational proddings of one who is eager for dialogue. Like the ants and termites Thomas writes about so fondly, the essayist is the lone ant (or the solitary thought) entering an arena where other ants--or thoughts--are doing the same things; eventually,

> When the mind is heated a little, the movement speeds up and there are more encounters. . . .Docking and locking [occur], pairs are coupled to pairs, and aggregates are formed. . . . Now the motion of all the structures, large and small, becomes patterened and ceaselessly motoric, like the *Brandenbergs*.
>
> (*Medusa and the Snail* 153)

We've been hearing a good deal of talk lately about the "personal" (or "exploratory") essay, and the discussion has been getting heated, political, angry. The term "personal" in the context of composition causes many rhetoricians to shoot from the hip: it smacks of an arrogant individualism which has no place in a collaborative classroom, they say. We smile knowingly when we hear students justifying their tortured, passive constructions by invoking the "never say I in an essay" rule. However wrongheaded that rule sounds, most of us really believe its fundamental assumption, that academic writing should raise the writer out of the morass of selfood (i.e., of touchy-feelie subjectivism) into the divine light of objective critical analysis.

But as Lewis Thomas's essays reveal, the exploring self cannot be segregated from its social milieu, which provides the wherewithal for the exploration. A writer-explorer ventures into the world of otters and beavers to witness them holistically, subjectively. Tension between the two halves of the brain is generated. Should the writer acknowledge the left half and produce a well-structured, carefully reasoned essay with explicit thesis statement and clearly marked transitions, or should she acknowledge the right half and write spontaneously and rhapsodically about the encounter? The shouting across the corpus collosom rises to a fever pitch.

You will recall the young Mark Twain expressing his frustrations at having to lose a sense of the river's beauty and mystery in order to learn to navigate successfully through it. Is this an inevitable loss? I for one do not believe it. The very existence of our corpus collosoms suggest a need for recognizing a synthesis instead of a dichotomy.

I am contending here that Lewis Thomas can reveal to students of composition a way of engaging oneself with a subject holistically, before examining in any finished, scientific, higher-order-reasoning manner. Thomas's essays acknowledge the affective center at the heart of intellectual inquiry--as Susan McLeod argues in her essay, "Some Thoughts About Feelings" [CCC Dec. 1987], affective states "are enabling." I would argue that before students can learn to write well they must acknowledge the affective dimension of their approach to a topic.

Once students can accept the compatibility of the affective with the intellective, they can learn at least three things about writing well from Lewis Thomas:

1. One can transact complex and factual information in a personal manner (without even having to say "I"); the personal and

the objective are complementary, not contrary.

2. Once can use colorful, metaphoric, playful language when discussing "serious" subjects like disease, health care, computers. All subjects are within the domain of the thinker; imagination is as elemental for analtyical discourse as it is for the so-called "creative" modes of discourse such as fiction or poetry.

3. An essay may proceed associatively, intuitively; not just logically. An essay can represent the mind in motion and still convey transact a central idea, and still achieve coherence.

As I said, students need to be weaned off the rules and regulations that prevent them from approaching a writing task with anything resembling pleasure. They tackle writing assignments the way they tackle problems in calculus or computer programming: What, they ask, are the best algorithms for solving the problem, for getting the program to run?

In his autobiography, *The Youngest Science: Notes of a Medicine Watcher*, Thomas talks about his own initial frustrations with trying to write his monthly essays--on assignment--for the *New England Journal of Medicine*:

> I tried outlining some ideas . . . making lists of items I'd like to cover in each piece, organizing my thoughts in orderly sequencees, and wrote several dreadful essays which I could not bring myself to reread, and decided to give up being orderly. I changed the method to no method at all . . .(242-43)

Thomas, like our students had been stymied by what an essay should be, until he began to think about what an essay might *do*--or more precisely, what he might do in an essay.

My advice is, first of all, to invite your students to voice initial critical responses to a Thomas essay, and discuss their criticisms in class. Let me illustrate this with one quick example. In "The Tucson Zoo," Thomas devotes a paragraph to contemplating "the piece of news" about himself that the otters and beavers have left him with.

> I learned nothing new about them Only about me, and I suspect also about you, maybe about human beings at large: we are endowed with genes which code out our reaction to beavers and otters, maybe our reaction to each other as well. . . . And the behavior released in us, by such confrontations, is, essentially, a surprised affection. It is compulsory behavior and we can avoid it only be straining with the full power of our conscious minds, making up conscious excuses all the way. Left to ourselves, mechanistic and autonomic, we hanker for friends.

Now the very next paragraph generally throws students for a loop. It is as follows:

> Everyone says, stay away from ants. They have no lessons for us; they are crazy little instruments, inhuman, incapable of controlling themselves, lacking manners, lacking souls. When they are massed together, all touching, exchanging bits of information held in their jaws like memoranda, they become a single animal. Look out for that. It is a debasement, a loss of individuality, a violation of human nature, an unnatural act.

Here is what one student of mine, Amy, wrote--and her response is representative of several: "He made a sudden switch from otters and beavers to ants. It was unclear to me why he made this transition." The student was uncomfortable with Thomas's lack of an immediate connection, one that is not picked up until the next paragraph:

> Sometimes people argue this point of view seriously and with deep thought. Be individuals, solitary and selfish, is the message. . . . Do not be a social animal. But this is a hard argument to make convincingly when you have to depend on language to make it.

--and not made fully explicit until the paragraph after that:

> Maybe altruism is our most primitive attribute, out of reach, beyond our control. . . .

What do I say to Amy and the several other students who agree with her? Well, for starters, I tell them that their criticism is valid; that readers who are unaware dynamic possibilities of essaying might be bothered by lack of explicit transitional markers.

But then I ask the students to assume that Lewis Thomas knew exactly what he was doing, and what reasons can anyone give to justify his rhetorical strategy? My approach, in other words, is not to be dogmatic about what works or what doesn't work. Let's not talk about what essays should be like and shift emphasis to what a writer may or may not wish to do in an essay. Suspend any preconceived notions about what works and

what doesn't work, for such notions usually sabotage a natural receptivity to new possibilities--and allow yourself to be receptive to a truly creative thinker.

Lewis Thomas is able to convey this thought much more eloquently than I can. In his concluding paragraph to "The Tucson Zoo," he writes:

> One thing I'd like to know most of all: when those ants have made the Hill, and are all there, touching an exchanging, and the whole mass begins to behave like a single huge creature, and *thinks*, what on earth is that thought? And while you're at it, I'd like to know a second thing: when it happens, does any single ant know about it? Does his hair stand on end?

Works Cited

McCleod, Susan. "Some Thoughts about Feelings." *College Composition and Communication* 38 (December 1987): 426-35.

Montaigne, Michel de. "On Repentence." *Essays*. Trans. J. M. Cohen. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1958:

Thomas, Lewis. *Late Night Thoughts on Listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony*. New York: Viking, 1983.

Thomas, Lewis. *The Medusa and the Snail*. New York: Viking, 1978.

Thomas, Lewis. *The Youngest Science*. New York: Viking, 1983.